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Councilor blasts commissioners over budget plan

By AARON ALDRIDGE
Staff Writer

The Sullivan County Commission was harshly criticized and commissioners were asked to step down by a Claremont city councilor during a public hearing Tuesday on the commission's \$27.3 million proposed budget for fiscal 2009 that includes a 32 percent increase in the amount to be raised by taxes.

"How in the world can you pro-

pose a 32 percent increase on the backs of people who can't pay their bills," councilor Jeff Goff said. "And to add insult to injury, you give yourself a 1.5 percent raise. Where is the logic in this?"

Goff told the commission that his constituents are very concerned about the approaching winter months and that many of them will have to choose between buying heating fuel and food.

"How are they going to afford another \$500 on their tax bill," Goff asked the commission. "If you don't

have the political courage to face reality, maybe you should consider doing something else."

The proposed budget requires \$13.7 million to be raised by taxes compared to the current budget where \$10.4 million was raised.

"If you were a private business, you would be out of business," Goff said. "There's no end in sight to this economic crisis. Where does it stop?"

Chair Jeff Barrette said the two major reasons for the increase in taxes is paying off one-third of a

\$2.5 million deficit from previous budgets and having realistic revenue projections.

"For the last few years we budgeted a lot higher revenue than came in," Barrette said. "We basically budgeted for the (nursing home) census we have now."

Goff suggested something needed to be done with the nursing home where a majority of the county deficit is generated.

"We cannot afford the nursing home," Goff said.

But commissioner Ben Nelson

said the home is a necessary safety net for county residents who cannot afford private health care.

"There may be a time when we need to get out of the nursing home business," Nelson said. "But I don't think that time is now."

Goff also suggested that treasurer Cynthia Sweeney has squandered taxpayer dollars by not seeking the best interest rates for tax anticipation notes, or TANs. During each fiscal year, the county borrows money to pay bills and repays the

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loans when taxes are collected in December.

"I did some quick calculations and the treasurer could have saved six figures over the past two years," Goff said. "It's unconscionable."

During a commissioner's meeting Tuesday afternoon, Sweeney requested a \$5 million TAN to begin July 1 so the county could pay its bills in the next fiscal year.

The commission approved the TAN, but following the meeting, the county executive finance committee met, reduced the amount to \$3 million, and passed a resolution that requires Sweeney to put the TAN and all future loans out for bid.

Sweeney said the bidding process could take as long as 30 days with another week added to get the loan paperwork ready. She said she was concerned that

there would not be any money available to make the July 9 payroll.

"It's going to take at least a full week to get the paperwork through the bank," Sweeney said.

Sweeney admitted that she has never used a formal bidding process when borrowing money. She said she would usually call several banks and ask for the going rate before choosing one.

"I make phone calls, but I never sent out formal bids," Sweeney said.

Rep. Ray Gagnon, D-Claremont, said he was very disappointed with the way TANs were acquired.

"It's about transparency," Gagnon said. "It's about being open in government."

Sweeney said she was very concerned that the TAN for the next fiscal year was reduced to \$3 million because the amount for

payroll will exceed the total amount of the TAN.

"Just the payroll alone is going to be \$4,250,000 from July to December," Sweeney said.

The finance committee decided to allow Sweeney to return at a later date and request more funding, should she need it. The committee also said she could use a portion of the \$1 million left on the current \$4 million TAN that was borrowed earlier this year to make payroll, should the bidding process not be completed by the July 9 payroll.

The finance committee is currently working on its proposed budget. Once that process is complete, the full delegation will meet at the county convention and vote on a final budget.

Aaron Aldridge can be reached at (800) 545-0347 ext. 139, or by e-mail at aaldridge@eagletimes.com.

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